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ABSTRACT

This book uses poetry and essays to share how welfare reform has affected the lives of a group of female adult literacy students from western Massachusetts. After a brief explanation of the book's purpose, the women who presented their views in the book's poems and essays are profiled. Presented next are six poems that several of the women wrote to share their views on males' stereotypes of women and the difficulties of coping with welfare reform. The essay "A Day in the Life" gives a glimpse into the daily life of one woman who is trying to attend literacy classes while navigating the welfare system and also caring for her children. "How Has Welfare Reform Affected Your Life?" presents some of the women's responses in interviews focusing on general and specific aspects of welfare reform, the relationship of education to welfare reform and employment, and welfare reform's impacts on recipients' emotions and family. "What Helps You Keep Going?" and "What Do You Recommend? What Would Help You To Meet Your Goals?" focus on strategies for coping with the difficulties of meeting the requirements imposed by welfare reform. "Learning Tools--The Tree and Carolyn Hicks" describes two tools used by the women. (MN)

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Out on a Limb

CE 081 077

Out On A Limb

Created and Edited by
The Read/Write/Now Adult Learning Center's
Changes Project Team Members:
Karen Gladden, Karen Rivera and Sherry Russell

Spring 2000

We would like to thank the teachers and learners at Read/Write/Now for their support and assistance; the members of the Changes Project for giving this project life; and, most of all, the women whose words appear in this book for their courage in telling their stories.

For copies of this booklet please contact the Read/Write/Now Adult Learning Center:

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Who This Book is For

This book is for

- Adult Learners
- Teachers
- Program Administrators
- Politicians and Policy Makers

and others who are interested in reading the thoughts, feelings and experiences of a group of women from Western Massachusetts about the effects of Welfare Reform on their lives. All of the women whose words appear in this book have three things in common: they are current or former welfare recipients; they are mothers – most of them are single mothers - and, they are now, or have recently been, enrolled in an adult literacy program.

Why We Wrote This Book

The idea for this book came out of research we were doing – as a part of the Changes Project (see the Who We Are Section for more information) - on the effects of Welfare Reform on adult students at Read/Write/Now Adult Learning Center. The more stories we heard, and the more we learned, the more important we felt it was to have a way to tell what we were hearing. This book was born of that conviction.

We wrote this book because we believe that stories have the power to make change. We want to break the harmful myths and stereotypes about women who are welfare recipients. We want to tell stories that show the strength and courage of women who are on welfare and struggling to raise a healthy family. We want to tell stories that show the powerful hopes and dreams of women on welfare, their desires to be independent, and their struggles to make this possible. The stories in this book are of strong women who are working hard to make their lives better. This book is a place for these women to tell their stories. These are stories of hardship, but also of courage and hope. They are stories that need to be heard.

Welfare Reform is a big issue. It is effecting a lot of people, especially single mothers and their children. There are many stereotypes about women on welfare: we're couch potatoes, we're lazy, we can't keep our legs closed. Some people *are* abusing the system, but they are in the minority. Most of the women we know are working very hard to reach their goals. They are trying to get their education - they are learning to read and write, they are trying to get their GEDs. They don't want to be on welfare forever. They have hopes and dreams. They want to be independent, they want to get jobs they can support their families on, they want to be self-sufficient. If we want to have healthy communities, we need to give people the support they need to become independent.

Now that welfare reform has kicked in, it has made it very difficult for the women in our program to reach their goals. Their hopes and dreams have been shattered. The two-year time limit, the work requirement, the Family Cap Law, the difficulty finding good, affordable day care, all of these things have meant that many of the women we know have had to drop out of school, and some of them are facing homelessness and the possibility of losing their children. The simple fact is that without being able to read and write, without a diploma or degree, you cannot get a living wage job.

Education is the key to success. Without that education, "you ain't got nothin'". These stories include our struggles to get a better education. Some of us are making it, some of us are not.

We believe that women are being blamed, and that they are being blamed unfairly. Without the support of fathers and husbands, women are trying very hard to raise their families, and it seems that they and their children are being punished for it. It is not just them who are being harmed - we are all being effected.

We got involved in The Changes Project so we could find out more about how people in our program are being affected. Knowing more has helped us to understand better what the issues are, and now we want to tell others what we've learned. We want to tell the stories of the women we know: women who work very hard to try to ensure a future for themselves and their families.

We hope this book will give a picture of what is really going on - beyond the myths and beyond the stereotypes. We hope that reading this book will help you to understand that we are women with voice, with dreams, and with the desire to be independent.

Formatting Note:
In all sections with participant quotes, participants' words will appear in regular type, all other text will be in italics.

Who We Are

The women whose stories and words appear in this book are all students in an adult literacy program in Massachusetts called Read/Write/Now Adult Learning Center. They are from many different walks of life, they are from various ethnic groups and religions, they speak several different languages, and are anywhere from twenty to fifty years old. What they all have in common, however, is that they are all women, most are single parents, and they have all come back to school to work towards improving their education and making a better life for themselves and their children. Since we began writing this book, a number of these women have had to leave school because of the pressures of Welfare Reform.[1] We have changed some of the names that appear in this book because we were unable to reconfirm all of the participants' wishes regarding confidentiality. Their words and experiences, however, remain unchanged.

The interviews and focus groups from which these stories were gathered were done as a part of a two-year research project called The Changes Project. It was funded by the Field Initiated Studies Grants Program of the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, at the US Department of Education. The project was complex, involving five different research teams looking at three main questions. Each research team was located at an adult basic

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[1] *Over the past three years, since Welfare Reform was instituted, Read/Write/Now knows of ten learners who have left school because of the effects of Welfare Reform. The reasons for leaving include: reaching the two-year time limit on benefits (learners left to find other means of supporting themselves and their families); the work requirement (sometimes the work requirement conflicted with class time, and/or learners were unable to provide child care for their children for the extra hours), or because of the general difficulty and time required to navigate the new requirements and demands, and the resultant stress that placed on learners and their families. We also estimate that an additional ten learners who left school left because of Welfare Reform, but are unable to verify this estimate because learners left abruptly before records could be finalized, and/or learners then moved, or no longer had a telephone contact number.*

education site and was made up of both student researchers and a research facilitator. The coordinating organization was SABES West, the Western Regional Support Center of the Massachusetts Department of Education's System for Adult Basic Education Support at Holyoke Community College.

Karen R., Karen G. and Sherry

Our team, based at the Read/Write/Now Adult Learning Center (an adult basic education program in Springfield, Massachusetts), focused on trying to understand how Welfare Reform affects adult learners. Although we had wonderful help from many different people at Read/Write/Now over the course of the two years of our work, the three primary team members are: Karen Gladden, Karen Rivera and Sherry Russell. Following is a brief description of each of us:

Karen Rivera, "I am a mother of four - three boys and a girl, ages nine to seventeen - that receives welfare. I am separated from my husband, but I have a partner. He doesn't live with me. I am a thirty-eight year old

Karen R. with her children

woman that goes to an adult literacy program. I've been attending the program for seven years. Someday I'm hoping to get my GED – before my kids get theirs – which I doubt. I'm white, I'm born and raised in Springfield, MA, and English is my only language"

Karen & Karen at a presentation

Karen G. at a workshop

Karen Gladden, "I am an African-American woman born and raised in Springfield, MA. I speak English. I am the mother of three boys, and a grandmother of eight - with two more on the way. I am forty-two years old. I attend an adult literacy program. I've been coming to it for between six and seven years. I am here for two reasons: to learn how to read and to get my GED. I am an ex-welfare recipient. My source of income is now Social Security (SS) and Social Security Insurance (SSI). The reason why I was interested in Welfare Reform is to learn more about the changes and their effects on women and their children – it has a great effect on children and their parents. I think the only way for the policy makers to know what is going on is to come down and see for themselves. I hope all our findings and our research, I hope it helps them really realize that education is

Karen G. with one of our trees (see p. 67) at a presentation

definitely the key. You can NOT get off AFDC without education, job training and day care."

Sherry (on left) at R/W/N

Sherry Russell, "I am a thirty-five year old woman. I am from the United States, but not one particular region since I grew up – and later worked - in various parts of the world. I am currently living in Western Massachusetts. I have been teaching, in different settings, for close to fifteen years, and have been involved in adult education for about ten years. I am white, from a middle class background, and my native language is English. The women I worked with and met through the course of this project were an inspiration to me. They have so much strength and so much knowledge. I am even clearer now about my belief that they are the ones who are in the best position to inform the laws and policies that affect their lives."

We would also like to thank Lizzie Bogel, Leslie Graham, Yong Anderson and Lou Leduc. They were members of our team for several months each and were a great help when we were getting started and in gathering these stories.

The following are some brief descriptions of many of the women whose stories appear in this book. Most of the women we interviewed are from the continental US and Puerto Rico, while one is from Jamaica, and one is from Liberia.

Carole:
"I'm a mother of five kids. The two oldest ones is in New York with my mom. Three is living with me right now. The oldest one is nine. The next one is seven years old, and I have a nineteen months baby. I'm on welfare right now, and I'm in school also [at Read/Write/Now], trying to get a education, but I have to stop from school to go to the Welfare to Work Program, that's job training to get a job. And I'm willing to get a job, but I need a better education for the job what I need."

Miranda:
She has two daughters, ages eight and eleven. At the time when this was written, she had applied for an extension from Welfare. We don't know whether she received it. Her phone has since been disconnected, and we have been unable to get in touch with her.

Andrea:
She has four children, three young daughters and a baby. Both her youngest daughter and the child she is about to have are affected by the Family Cap Law. They will receive food stamps but no cash assistance.

Christine:
She is twenty-five years old and has two children ages seven and five. When she received notification of her two-year time limit, she moved in with her mother and sent her two children to live with their father. She knew she would have no way to support them once her time limit was reached. She left high school when her second child was born and returned to school – to Read/Write/Now - to continue her own education once her children were of school age. She has since left Read/Write/Now.

Jennifer:
She is a former welfare recipient but now is living with her mother and other members of her family and they provide her with financial support. She continues to receive Medicaid for herself and her children, but no longer receives cash assistance. She has five children ages eleven, six, five, three and three. She has remained in school (at Read/Write/Now) and has dreams of attending college. She is twenty-five years old.

Sophia:
At the time we interviewed *Sophia*, she had just received notification of her two-year time limit, and was determined to remain at Read/Write/Now in order to get into a GED program and pass the GED before her cash assistance ended. She has four children ages seven, five, three and fifteen months. She attended Read/Write/Now in the morning, and an ESOL program in the afternoon, while her children were in school and at Head Start. She has since left

Read/Write/Now without having been able to prepare for a GED program.

Veronika:
She is twenty-six years old and has three children ages five, two and several months. She has just received notification of her two-year time limit.

Jane:
Jane has four adult children ages 27, 26, and 22, and also has a 14 year old. She is a former welfare recipient.

Also appearing in this book are the words of *Anna*, *Samira*, *Maribel* and *Alina*.

Thanks to all of these women for sharing their thoughts, feelings and experiences with us.

Our Poetry[2]

"Welfare's like a traffic accident.
It can happen to anybody,
but especially it happens to women.
And that is why welfare is a women's issue."
Johnnie Tillmon, Welfare Activist

The Man's Stereotype

Perhaps they could be couch potatoes too,
And Jerry Springer lay-abouts,
soap opera fans.
Why haven't they been asked to keep their legs closed?
Or, to tie it in a knot?
Why haven't they been offered birth control?
Or, invited to abuse and batter their bodies?

There should be a law.
If a man has a family and leaves it,
if he leaves that family,
and that family has no choice but to go on welfare,
and then he goes off and makes another family,
why can't there be a law against that?

Why do the men give the women reputations?
What gives them the right?

What are they going to tell their children?

Why do they lay the blame on us?
Why should we be shunned?

---

[2] *Note: We wrote these poems to express our thoughts and feelings about Welfare Reform.*

It takes a man to stand up to his responsibilities,
a man,
not a baby-maker.

What do you call a man who leaves,
who goes off and makes more children?
A slut.

August 18, 1999
Karen Gladden and Karen Rivera

Welfare Reform

Welfare Reform is running water.
The water is getting deep and we
Can't stay afloat.
We get hit with boulders and we
Can't stay afloat.
God Help Me.

July 20, 1998
Karen Rivera

Welfare Reform is an Ant

We go on a picnic and have fun with the kids.
The sun is out,
And the grass is green.
Before you know it,
The sky is black and the grass turns brown.
Then the ants come and take it all from us.

July 20, 1998
Karen Rivera

Trying to Survive

Welfare Reform is like an ocean.
If you goes inside, you must learn how to swim.
What happen if you do not know how to swim?
You have to learn or the next thing is
To learn how to drown.

Les Graham
July 20, 1998

Luxury

Welfare Reform is not a luxury.
It's not promising,
And it's definitely not a crutch.

It's hopeless.

Hum the words,
"There's no food in the house -
No breakfast,
No lunch".
Hum the words,
"No gas,
No lights,"
Hum the words.

Lazy? No.
It's starvation,
It's, "About to be homeless".
Luxury? No.

No.

No.

Karen Rivera and Karen Gladden,
November 18, 1999

Queen of the World

If I were the Queen of the World,
I would grow the biggest garden in the world.
I would grow food and pass it out to the people.
As the children get bigger,
As they eat from my big garden,
There will be no starvation
In my Queendom.

July 20, 1998
Karen Rivera

A Day In The Life

We have included this section to give a small window into the daily life of Sophia, one of the women whose words appear in this book. Although their daily routines are not exactly the same, all of the women in these pages share some things in common: they all have busy lives, and they are all trying to balance caring for children; navigating the welfare system; making ends meet; going to school; and, trying to make a decent life for themselves and their families.

Weekdays

6:00 a.m.:
Wake-up, shower, wake up the children, get them dressed and give them breakfast – usually something simple – get the baby up and dressed, get out of the door by 8:00.

8:00 a.m.
Catch the bus with the baby and the three children. The 7:30 bus is often full and just passes us by, that's why we try to catch the 8:00 bus but that means I am sometimes late to my morning class. Anyway, first I take the younger children to Head Start and then I take my oldest son on another bus to his school, and then I go to my school.

9:00 a.m. – 3:00 p.m.
The children are in school and in day care, and Sophia attends an ESOL class in the morning and a Pre-GED class in the afternoon.

3:05 p.m.
I pick up the oldest child from his school.

3:30 p.m.
I pick up the three youngest children from Head Start.

4:00 p.m.
We catch bus home.

4:30 – 9:30
The baby takes a nap, I cook dinner, give the children baths, help them with their homework and do housework.

9:30
We go to bed.

Saturday
We clean the house, do laundry, go shopping and sometimes go to the library or in the summer to the park or to the YMCA.

Sunday

We go to Church in the morning and then again in the afternoon.

When Sophia has to go to the Welfare Office (the Department of Transitional Assistance) for appointments (or to sort out problems – for example, recently her Medicaid card expired and a replacement was not sent although Sophia had requested one on several different visits), or has to take her children to the hospital or to the Doctor's office (one of her daughters suffers from asthma and needs constant medical care), she goes either during her class time, or takes all of the children with her after school.

We asked her:
How do you keep calm and not lose your temper with the children? It sounds like a lot!

Sophia answered:
A long time ago I was screaming – like, "Please stop!" But now since I'm going to Church everything has changed for me. The only way you can control your kids is by talking because if you scream at them they're going to be real mad all the time. They will do it again – you just keep reminding them. Well I get tired, but I have to do it.

Hopes, Dreams and Goals[3]

This section is about the hopes, dreams, and goals of the women with whom we talked. The reality of what we heard was very different from some of the common myths and stereotypes about welfare recipients.

Some of the common myths are: Welfare recipients are lazy. They don't want to work. They just want to lie around all day watching soap operas and collecting their checks.

The reality – or what we heard - is: All of the women we know want very much to be independent. They are working hard to try to improve their education so they can get jobs that pay well enough so they can support their families.

The following are some of the comments we heard.

Miranda:
I don't want to depend on no one. I want to depend on myself. I don't want to depend on other people doing things for me.

I just hope and I wish to God that I could find a decent job that could support me and my kids, and I can get them whatever they need.

Carole:
I came back to school [to Read/Write/Now] to make the future better. I need a better education to get a job. Because I'm willing to work. I don't want to depend on welfare, I want to be an independent mother. I want to work for what I need.

My goals and dreams, before Welfare Reform, were to finish up school, and get my GED, you know.

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[3] Formatting Note - Reminder: In all sections with participant quotes, participants' words will appear in regular type, all other text will be in italics.

I don't want to stay on welfare. I want to be an independent mother. I want to work for what I want. I don't want to sit down and wait on no checks.

Alina:
I am on welfare. My opinion is that I hate welfare because I want to be an independent woman. Cause I got one child, and I want to grow. If you want to grow, you want to do something with yourself.

People Talk about Wanting to Stay in School – or Wanting to Return to School - and Wanting a Good Job:

Andrea:
I want to get a good job – to get enough up in the world. I'd like to have a good job working as a nurse or in an office with computers. One of those two. That's my dream, I want to come back to school, because I miss it. I miss the teachers, I miss the people here.

If I could come back to the program, I would love to come back just to get my reading better and my writing. And I would get a decent job. That's my goal.

Miranda:
My dream [before Welfare Reform] was to get my reading and my writing perfectly. Because I wanted to become a teacher. That has always been my dream, to teach other people.

Sophia:
I want to learn to speak and write English. And I want to take my GED in English. And I always try to be here, at Read/Write/Now. If I'm not here [it's] because my kids are sick or I had an appointment or I had to do something … very important. I like to be here. I like to be at school. I already had all that time that I was a mother at home all day, cooking, cleaning … now I want to have something else. And something better. That's why I keep trying to do it. It's hard, it's not easy – like you don't have no transportation and you don't have nobody there each day to help you. It's hard. But I always have my plan in my mind and no matter what happens I'm going to do it.

Also, I want everything for my kids. They're smart and they're cute and the only way I'm going to support them is if I take my GED and look for a job. I want to finish what I'm doing, and I want to be somebody in the future. That means I want to get a good job so I could support them. I do it for my kids and I do it for myself.

Christine:
My goal is to get my GED and find a good job so I can take care of my kids.

Also to make sure I'm self-confident – that helps me to keep growing.

One day I'd like to go to college. My dream job is to be a nurse.

Veronika:
My plans are to be able to continue to come to school and to do a lot of things that I haven't done so far. I want to get my GED, maybe go to college. I would like to be a teacher. I would like to be a secretary. I would like to be a lot of things. But for that I have to get my education first.

Jane:
I want to work with handicapped kids. I want to better my reading and writing and computer skills and get into a nurse's aide training program.

Jennifer:
I have big dreams. I have big, big, big dreams. And that's gonna take college. I really want to go to college – I really want to go. I am going. I know that with all my heart. I would like to be a doctor. I would like to work with the younger people. The ones that everyone feels that they're so hard to reach when they just need love and understanding. I would like to be an example to my community for the younger people. Not only talk, but have them see me doing it. If we just work together there is hope.

So, I can't wait to just dig in. Cause I'm going to take a big bite out of this world.

How has Welfare Reform Affected Your Life?

Introduction

Commissioner McIntire (head of the Massachusetts Department of Transitional Assistance) believes that Welfare Reform has been successful and has not caused any hardship. In the Worcester Telegram & Gazette on February 14, 2000, she called Massachusetts' Welfare Reform "an extraordinary success", and stated that, "the two-year cut off does not cause hardship".. She said that, "Recipients entering the workplace, even those getting a job for the first time, improve their economic situation significantly -- and their sense of self-worth immeasurably".

This may be true for some – those who already know how to read and write, who have high school diplomas and college degrees, for those who have job skills, and who have support in helping to care for their children. But what about those who do not have the education to get and keep a good job, and for those who do not have help to care for their children? What happens to them when they reach their two-year time limit? Is Welfare Reform helping them to "improve their economic situation … and their sense of self-worth"?

We asked the women we interviewed to tell us what they think, based on their own experiences. What follows are their comments, along with some short selections from newspaper articles and other sources that help to highlight and frame what they are saying. We have organized their comments into these five categories: 1) the General Effects of Welfare Reform; 2) a "What Do You Think?" section on Welfare Reform and its specific programs; 3) a section on Education, its meaning and purpose, its relationship to Jobs, and Welfare Reform's effects on these; 4) a section on Stress, Fear and Worry; 5) and, finally, a section on Family.

General Effects

We talked about how Welfare Reform was affecting our lives in general. Many of these comments relate to the two-year time limit, the part of Welfare Reform legislation in Massachusetts that says that a family may receive benefits for only two years within a five year period.

Miranda:
I'm not coming to school anymore, and the reason is because of the welfare reform that's going on. ... It's not easy ... especially for a mom with two kids.

What this did to us, what it did to us, our dream just went down the toilet.

When they did this, my goal went down the drain. Everything, my hopes, everything went down - with all this welfare reform. They took me out of this program. I think that's effected me a lot. My dream was to become a teacher, to teach other kids what I learned. But they took all my dreams down.

> WELFARE REFORM MADE MY DREAMS GO BY FAST, WHEN I HAD THEM.

Mentally and physically it's affecting me a lot. All I think about is just this - thinking about the next day and when you see the month is going by so fast it makes me think more - I get butterflies in my stomach. What kind of job am I going to find? Are they going to hire me? Or am I going to be able to fill out the application on my own? Things like that. It makes me think a lot.

Miranda in front of the grocery store

Welfare Reform made my dreams go by fast, when I had them.

Miranda:
Every night, night and day, I go to sleep and I wake up, that's all I think about: how I'm gonna feed my kid; how I'm gonna pay insurance for my car; how I'm gonna pay my bills? How I'm gonna put food on my table for my kid? How I'm gonna have clothes for them? How? You know, cause if you work at McDonald's, what you gonna work for, $5 an hour? That ain't good. I used to do housekeeping, you know how much I used to bring home a week? $120, that's it. $120. You think I can feed my kids and everything like that. Raise them, put clothes on their back, NO. That's what I'm saying, you know, what they did to me - they took me out of this program. I think that's affected me a lot.

Sophia:
I think about Welfare how they help me out for a long time. They help me with my kids and now they are helping me so I can come to school and they got stuff for my kids. But now I'm a little bit scared because my time come up and I'm not finished what I'm doing. I'm scared about that. I only have a year and that's not going to be enough time for me. I want to do so many things in that little bit of time.

Christine:
After they passed this two year limit thing I had to make a decision to have my children live with their father. I moved in with my mother. The most important thing to me now is getting my GED and finding a good job so I can get my kids back and take care of them.

If not for Welfare Reform, I'd still have my kids.

IF NOT FOR WELFARE REFORM, I'D STILL HAVE MY KIDS.

Veronika:
I want to stay in school and get my GED. I would like to be in school enough time so I could learn, but this welfare problem it's kinda like killing you, you know?

Welfare helps you – it helps you to extreme – you get Medicaid, you get food stamps, you get the things that you need. Some people … don't want to go to school, don't want to get a job, they're just depending on the welfare … so that the reason why they made Welfare Reform. So the people that ARE going to school, that ARE getting their kids what they need … they are the ones that are getting effected with this Welfare Reform.

You gotta get yourself doing something, but you gotta do it fast – you can't take your time on nothing – you kinda like have to fly and do what you gotta do. Cuz when the time is up if you ain't got a job or nothing to support your family, that's it, they're gone.

Carole back for a visit at Read/Write/Now

Carole:
It effect me so bad, because right now I have to drop out of school to find a job. My goal is to finish school and get my GED so I can start a nurse's aid training program. But I cannot be in school because I'm out there looking for a job. I have to finish up school, and get the GED before I start the nursing program.

Myth: *Welfare costs have exploded, burdening taxpayers and enlarging the federal deficit.*

Fact: *Only 1 percent of the federal budget, and 2 percent of the average state budget, goes to welfare.*

Myth: *Welfare primarily benefits minorities.*

Fact: *39 percent of welfare recipients are white, 37 percent are African American, and 18 percent are Hispanic. The percentage of white families on welfare has increased since 1975, while the percentage of African Americans has decreased.* *(From "Welfare Myths and Facts", a Web Site Publication of the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, 1999,http://www.mott.org/poverty/ending_welfare/.)*

What Do You Think?

What do you think of when you hear the words "Welfare Reform"?

Veronika:
Well, the first thing that comes to my mind is people walking in through my door taking my children away.

Since I had my first kid a lot of things changed. He … brought a little bit of sparkle into my life. And I never depend on nobody to take my kids, to raise my kids, or to keep them over night. I always like to be there for them, to let them know that mommy is always going to be there, you know. I don't want some strangers just walking into my house and taking my kids and raising my kids. So, that's what first comes into my head when I hear Welfare Reform.

Alina:
Welfare Reform is scary. Like for mothers who can't read, can't write, and they can't fill out applications - and it's hard, hard to find a job, you know. Welfare Reform – they are hard. They are so hard.

WHEN I HEAR WELFARE REFORM I'M SCARED.

Anna:
Oh wow, when I hear Welfare Reform I'm scared. If the Welfare don't pay the school, I have to stay at home, I will forget English because you have to practice .. This is bad, this is bad things I have on my mind.

Miranda:
When I hear "Welfare Reform" it makes me mad because there were so many dreams I had when I was coming to the program. But now that I'm not in the program no more, now that I'm in this situation with the welfare reform, it makes me think how much it effects my kids and things like that. Especially when a person does not know how to read or write, or fill out an application. I had to drop out because of Welfare Reform. Now I'm starting to close back in the way I was at

the beginning. Because this program was helping me out a lot. I went from a Kindergarten to a Sixth grade reading level before I had to drop out.

Miranda at the door of R/W/N

Sophia:
For me it's "stop helping you". The people who are getting Welfare … need it. I'm afraid. My daughter she got asthma, she is so sick, she in hospital, she always have ear infections – For me, it's going to be hard. I have four kids and I know it's going to be hard when the Welfare stops.

> FOR ME IT'S "STOP HELPING YOU".

I know some people don't need it, but for me I'm going to do all my sacrifice so I can finish school and support my kids. So right now I need Welfare.

Christine:
Two years is not enough time. They'll cut you off even if you're working towards your goals. Welfare Reform is not a great idea.

Jennifer:
It's going to be on their hands when people are not getting on with their education. It's gonna be on their hands when people become homeless. A lot of this crime is going on because of what they're doing now.

Karen G.:
I feel that they just sat down at the table and they decided our lives and our future. I don't think that anyone should be allowed to abuse the system, but I think that those who really need it should be able to get the help. I'm appalled at the new changes. I'm not happy with any of them. I feel sorry for some of the mothers that are on, and I know they are being humiliated. Then we have the children. What about our children? Some of us are going to have to take and resort

to putting our children in foster care. Some of us are going to be homeless. I don't think they made the right decisions or choices.

Andrea:
Welfare [Reform] don't really ... it's not helping nobody. It's hard. There are people in the street getting out of Welfare with no money, and then jobs ain't helping them. So you can hardly expect to have a job if welfare is not going to help you right now. They're going to cut you off soon.

What do you think of Welfare Reform Programs?

We asked people to talk about their experiences with specific Welfare Reform Programs designed to help them including the Work Requirement and the Family Cap Law.

Work Requirement

The following are conversations we had about the Work Requirement (which requires Welfare recipients who are able-bodied and whose youngest child is six years old and in school to work for twenty hours a week in order to receive their welfare check). We have heard people call the work requirement "community service", but we are not sure why. It is not voluntary work, but it is work – either paid or unpaid – that is ***required*** *by the Department of Transitional Services (DTA) in order to receive benefits.*

Jane:
Why should they do the work requirement and pay somebody else to look after their kids? It doesn't make no sense.

WHY SHOULD THEY DO THE WORK REQUIREMENT AND PAY SOMEBODY ELSE TO LOOK AFTER THEIR KIDS? IT DOESN'T MAKE NO SENSE.

Question: Does the work requirement give you the skills you need to get a good job?

Andrea: Not in a certain way - like if they want you to clean the streets or something like that. If they help you in the hospital and in the school, yeah that's something, helping with the kids or something. But, cleaning the street, that's not going to help you.

That's stupid, you know? You work in the street for twenty hours getting your pay still then they're gonna cut it off soon too so what's … You know, I'm like, oh forget these people.

Miranda summed up her feelings this way:

Miranda:
I don't want their help, because I know they're gonna tell me you can do community service or get me a lousy job that I will not like and I will not feel comfortable. Or a job that's gonna mess me up with my schedule for picking up my kids and dropping off my kids. See, cause I try to look for a job where I can drop off my kids at school, and be there at the time they come out. Cause here I'm a single parent, you know, and it's not easy. I have a seven year old, and a ten year old - two daughters.

I used to work. I had to travel from Westfield, from 7 o'clock in the morning and come back home at 5 o'clock. Who was watching my daughters? My next door neighbor. Thinking about is my daughters okay? Did they get to school fine? Are they taking good care of my daughters? Is my daughters fed? This Welfare Reform did not effect me only, it effected a lot of moms.

I'm not leaving my daughters with strangers.

Carole:
Or, you leave them out in the cold until you get home from work. You know?

Christine:
If you do go to school they still want you to do it [the work requirement] anyway. It's not helping people.

The following is from Carole.

Carole left school so that she could fulfill the Welfare Reform requirement that she attend a "Structured Job Search" program for twenty hours a week. This program is designed to help Carole to get a job. We asked her about her experiences there.

Carole:

Carole at the Welfare to Work Program

At the Welfare to Work... we do job search. We look in the paper, you have to look in the paper for what job you want, and call up and then they gotta make an appointment to go and do an application and stuff like that. And if they call you for the job, you have to go and do the job. But it's a little bit hard for me because I dropped out of school when I was young and I didn't have a good education. Sometimes it's embarrass for me to like go to a place and do the application. I don't really get a full understanding of the application, you know. So, that's really bother me a lot.

At the Welfare to Work Program .. You have to find a job on your own. Sometimes they call you for a job there, like a warehouse job, you know like to cut chickens in a warehouse ... and I don't really want a job like that. I want to be a nursing aid, but I want to finish up school. That's the job I want.

WE NEED MORE TIME IN SCHOOL.

Question: *If there is something in the newspaper that you don't understand, is there someone there to help you read it?*

Carole: No, no. And sometimes there isn't a newspaper there, they should have it, but sometimes you have to bring in your own newspaper.

Question: *And you have to look in the newspaper yourself, there is no help? (No.) And this is the program welfare sent you to? And you had to drop out of a program - Read/Write/Now - in order to make the requirements of*

welfare, and go to this program here, and you have no knowledge of what you're doing?

Carole: I know, they told me I have to go there, that if I didn't I wouldn't get my twenty hours.

Question: *Did you ask them if you could do your twenty hours here?*

Carole: They told me that school doesn't count. There is some new law, and it doesn't count. If it's not the Welfare to Work Program, then it's community service [the work requirement].

Question: *So, you're going to have to go through life not reading?*

Carole: I guess so.

Question: *How long have you been going to the Welfare to Work Program?*

Carole: Five months now.

Question: *Five months you've been going, twenty hours a week, and you've applied to three jobs in five months, and nothing has happened...?*

Carole at the Welfare to Work Program

Carole: MmmHmmm.

Question: *Did you tell your worker about your reading ability?*

Carole: Yeah, I told her, she knows, but she told me my school hours doesn't count no more. They send you to work, or to Welfare to Work Program. They told you that if you don't go there, they are gonna close your case. I cannot go to school. Because the welfare, and the new rule is, we gotta work. So, I say to her, how can I work? I'm in school - and I don't even got the education, I just went to school until I was in the eighth grade. So she told me that -- Well, if you don't go to work for twenty hours a week, or do community service, you're not going to get nothing. Your case is going to close. Because that's the rules.

Question: *They should, because the President's wife is a big...You know, always talking about reading, and kids being in Day Care, you know, and she tries to keep all that open for the children. I still wonder why Hillary has not gotten involved. Maybe we should write her, and send her some*

of the stories ... We should send one to Oprah, to Hillary Clinton.

Carole: No, they don't really care about us, you know. The other day, like they want to send me for a job. I'm supposed to be at the job at 7 o'clock in the morning, at Holyoke. I tell them that's impossible. I got, a fifteen months baby, and my kids them was home like 8 o'clock. What am I going to do, leave the kids in the halls, and say okay, I have to go to work? Look after yourself and stuff like that? And then, they're the same ones gonna call DSS on me. To take away my kids. That's stupid, they don't think about stuff. They don't care, you know.

Eventually, Carole did find a job in a greeting card factory - sorting the cards. A neighbor helped her every morning to take her children to school and daycare. But Carole was fired from her new job after several weeks because her inadequate literacy and numeracy skills made it difficult for her to do the work accurately and at the required pace. This experience left her feeling very discouraged about her prospects of finding and keeping a job: "How can I get a job, when I don't even have the skills I need?"

I AM A STRONG MOTHER. I WANT TO BE AN INDEPENDENT MOTHER.

She could not return to school because she needed to find a way to support herself and her children. Without school, however, she feared she would never gain the sills necessary to work. In the meantime, she was deeply afraid, not knowing how she was going to care for her children, "Sometimes I don't know what to say to my landlord. I don't know how I will be able to have a roof over my head for me and my kids." Again and again she told us, "We need more time in school." "I'm a strong mother," she said, "I'll go out there and get a job, but I need to finish up school and get my GED [first]. Then I can leave welfare and go straight to work to support my kids. I always want to be an independent mother, you know?"

Family Cap Law

The Family Cap Law denies benefits (cash assistance or TAFDC) to a child born ten months or more after you first receive TAFDC, or within twenty months after you go off TAFDC. The child will receive no cash benefits for his or her entire childhood.

> THEY RATHER PUT THE KIDS IN FOSTER HOMES AND PAY THEM THE MONEY THAN HELP US TAKE CARE OF THEM.

Veronika:
The Family Cap Law, that affects me, you know. I mean, I understand that it's good in parts because teenagers I know they want to have kids to get money, you know. But I mean, if it happens, if you protect yourself … for me, for my son, I got pregnant on the pill, so that didn't help. For my daughter I was on the shot when I got pregnant, so that didn't help, you know. You protect yourself but you still get pregnant.

> THEY SAY THEY HAVE CHILD SUPPORT ... BUT I DON'T. ...AND THEN THEY GET MAD ... WITH THE WOMEN.

They say they have child support and all this, but right now I don't even feel like that works. I been after my son's father since my son was five months old. I given them where he works, I've given his social security number. And can you believe they haven't caught him? And my son is going on five.

And then they get mad, they do get mad with the women because they say the women don't' want to report the men and that is not so … cuz when we report the men, they don't do shit about it.
From a Group Discussion:
They rather put the kids in foster homes and pay them the money than help us take care of them.

Samira:
I think what the government is trying to do - prevent us from having babies. Maybe the government should have programs to help men to

take care of their children, for men to turn towards their children, so they'll have to do it, so that they know this is their responsibility.

Do you think the people who make the laws know what they are doing?

We asked people this question. This is what they said.

Carole:
They know that we want to better ourselves to get off of welfare. I don't really like this welfare thing, but ... I cannot do better. And I don't have the education that they want, to go out there and work, you know.

Sophia:
I know why they did it – they were tired of these people that they can do something and are not. For me they was helping people they was not supposed to help. So everything was Welfare Welfare Welfare. But it's real sad. I hope that Welfare understand that there are some people that really need it.

THE ONES THAT COULDN'T READ AND WRITE, THEY SHOULDN'T HAVE TOOK OFF OF WELFARE. THEY ARE TRYIN' - THEY SHOULD BE GIVEN A LONGER TIME TO GET ON THEIR FEET.

Alina:
I think what they are doing is trying to have the mothers get on their feet and I think the law kind of hurts. To put and judge a person – people - they should first ask more questions [of] the people who is still on welfare. They should ... find out another idea what to do before they drop people off welfare. That's what I think.

The ones that couldn't read and write, they shouldn't have took off of welfare. They are tryin' - they should be given a longer time to get on their feet.

Christine:
Not all the time. In the case of Welfare Reform ... no, that's not a right one.

Veronika:
In part I think they know what they're doing. But they're doing it to everybody. I guess they think that it's everybody [who is taking advantage of the system]. If you do something then everybody pays for you, you know what I'm saying? They're not sitting there saying, "Well, this girl is still going to school so instead of giving her the twenty-four month time limit we just gonna let her keep going until we know she's ready to go to work or to do something for her kids".

Jennifer:
No, because they're … they are comfortable. They haven't been worried about it. They go home to a family, and eat, whatever. I'm not saying they don't have problems, no one said that. But as far as what makes you a good person … if you can take yourself out of yourself and put yourself in someone else's situation and be able to feel …If you can't do that, if you can't relate to my needs, how will you know how to help us? If you can go home and not think about that I don't want you for my president, or whatever you are.

I WISH THEY WAS IN OUR SHOES AND SEE HOW WE FEEL ...

Andrea:
No. I wish they was in our shoes and see how we feel, you know. How they feel one day on welfare suffering how we suffering. You know with kids that are sick and need medication and we having to be paying it out of our pocket, you know. It's not right that we have to suffer because of them.

Samira:
[The Social Worker] is the middleman. They're doing it for the law. And she, the little man middleman, she has the power, she give me the word, what to do. Even though I would tell her, what your problem is - but if she doesn't care and she still says, you have to do what I tell you to do, I have to do what she's saying. What am I gonna do? They know that we can't read and write. They know we can't have a better job to support ourselves. But what I'm saying is, the paperwork came from over there, and they cannot change it. Even though they would pass their word. But if OVER THERE doesn't change it, they can't change it either.

Miranda:
No, I don't think so. Because if they only knew what they are doing to people …

Look at all these parents, you know that on December first they been already cut off. Christmas is just around the corner. Imagine your kids gonna say, "Ma, where's my gift, where's my present?" Or, worst of all, "Ma, there's nothing in the refrigerator,". Welfare Reform did this you know. That's what I was thinking of - How I'm gonna feed my kids? How I'm gonna pay my bills? That's all I was thinking of, you know. And I'm still thinking about it, cause this month is already going bye-bye. Two more months to go. Then it's February, and when that month comes, right there, boom. You probably think, oh, don't worry about it, I'll get my check pretty soon. That's bull! Say bye-bye, it's gone. Cause they won't say, okay, we'll give you another chance or nothing like that. They won't go with that crap. They're like, you're gone, you're gone. You lost it, you lost it, bye. You know, it's affected me a lot.

Bye Bye, Gone, they shut the door right in your face. WHOOSH.

Miranda in front of DTA

Miranda at DTA

I don't think the people who make the laws know what they are doing. No. I don't think so.

Education

We often talked about education, what it means, and how Welfare Reform has affected it. Here are some of our feelings, thoughts and experiences specifically about education.

What does education mean to you?

Andrea:
I came back to school for my kids and for myself, to help them and to help myself. I want to help the oldest so she can learn more. She's behind so I'm trying to help her. Also, I could see I couldn't get a good job without school.

School is good, I like it. It's helping me more to read and write and do math and computers. And writing more, I used to hate writing. Now I love it.

Christine:
It helps me a lot in reading. I used to not read that much, now I read all the time. And it helps me in math. Also, before I used to have trouble telling people how I felt and now I just let it out. I have more confidence.

Carole at R/W/N

LEARNING IS POWER.

Jennifer:
School has given me hope – to know that I'm going to be somebody in life. Cause you know learning is power. And power is confidence – cause you know what you're doing. That's hope for me.

I'm getting everything all together and all the information I absorb in school, I just rest on it – and then when I go out there I try to use it.

Education helps you help your children:

Miranda:
I could come back to school and things like that to learn how to read and write, but… it's like, the Welfare Reform will not let me do that. It took me out of my dreams. My daughters used to ask me, every day, "Ma, how was school. Did you like school? Did you learn something?". They would ask me things, and I would tell them, you know, they would see that I would bring home work from school, do it at home, and the same work that I do at school, I would teach them.

Karen Rivera:
Yeah, when you were in school, was there a difference in your children because of your improvement in reading?

Miranda:
There was really, because there are some things that my daughter, at this moment, she's getting what I used to get here. You know, the same things I used to learn, I would teach my daughters at home. Sometimes we would both help out each other.

When I can't read my ten-year old daughter a book, she says, "Don't worry about it, I'll read it for you,". And I don't want to always have to depend on my oldest daughter all my life.

Veronika:
When I had my son I started looking at him and seeing that every time my son went to school and came home with homework or something he was gonna come and ask me to help him. … I want to be able to sit there and at least try to help him, you know?

Being in school helps you to feel more confident, to feel less isolated, to get support from others, to express yourself better, and to depend on yourself.

Miranda:
Well, this program Read/Write/Now helps cause I used to be so shy, I didn't like to speak up with nobody. I was always on my own, in the corner, minding my business. That's where I used to be. That's where I started at. But everybody in this program helped me, they didn't laugh at me. Now I have learned how to read a little bit and how to write a little bit with this program. I'm, I'm pretty, I'm mad, cause now I can't be in it. They have helped me out so much, the teachers. With the welfare reform, [it] messed me up big time.

For me, for a person like me, when I first started in the program, I was really more locked up to myself than anybody else. I wouldn't speak to nobody. If a teacher would tell me to read, I would say no, because I was too shy to read, because I didn't know how to read. Then I started seeing that I was not the only one here by myself that did not know how to read. Other people in the program did not know how to do it themselves either. I let myself ... I opened up myself. I was talking to the students here, you know, how is it when you go for a job, you have to fill out the application, can you fill it out... all these things.

If I have any problems, I will talk with one of the teachers and let my feelings out. If I had to cry I would cry, and they would be there for me. And that's what I miss. In my house, if I start crying, the only one I got is my daughter, and she's too young to have all that pressure on herself. I don't want to do that to her.

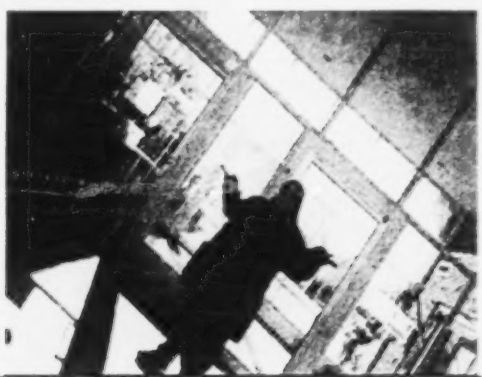
My dream is getting back to the program. I would love coming back to the program, cause it helped me out so much. It taught me how to depend on myself. They helped me out with that. You know, don't be negative on yourself if you do not know how to read. Never say, you can't do what you know you could do. That's what they teach me here, how to be on my own.

Samira:
I came back to school because I want to know how to read better -- so you can fit in sometime in another group and do things better for yourself. And, I join the program because I want to know myself better.

> BEFORE I USED TO HAVE TROUBLE TELLING PEOPLE HOW I FELT AND NOW I JUST LET IT OUT. I HAVE MORE CONFIDENCE.

Christine:
Before I used to have trouble telling people how I felt and now I just let it out. I have more confidence. I used to just be quiet and say nothing to nobody. Come to work and say nothing. Now I just talk to anybody who will listen. Also, I used to fight my problems out with everybody, and now I just talk about them.

Millie:
I love this program ... Cause they'll help you out, they'll help you to look for a job, you know, in the real world.



Carole and Miranda, visiting Read/Write/Now on different days, had similar reactions when they entered the hallway.

Carole:
If I'm stressed out, I feel comfortable to go to [one of the teachers] or someone and talk to them and they will give me good encouragement. I can feel better in myself, you know what I'm

saying? I still keep in touch with the teacher them because, they're the one who tried to make the future better for me right now, you know.

> THIS PROGRAM HELP ME A LOT IN EVERYTHING ... IT GAVE ME THE COURAGE TO DO WHAT I WANT TO DO.

Sophia:
The teachers understand you, that's the best part. They give you choice to try to help you if you got any problems you can go and speak with the teachers. They help you in so many ways.

This program help me a lot in everything. It put me straight in my mind. It gave me the courage to do what I want to do.

How has Welfare Reform affected your education?

Carole:
I had to drop out due to welfare changes, you know.

Miranda:
I had to drop out, I had to drop out. The reason is because of the welfare reform that's going on. It seems like everything just backfired in my face.

Education and Jobs

We talked more about our experiences getting and keeping jobs and often that brought us back to talking about education.

Governor Celluci – as proof that Welfare Reform is a success – points out that between March 1995 and November 1998, the number of welfare recipients in Massachusetts has dropped from 100,448 to 61,000. That is a 40% drop in the number of people receiving welfare benefits.

At the same time, the US Department of Agriculture published a report (in November, 1998), showing that 60,000 children in the state of Massachusetts go to bed hungry every night. A report in the Boston Globe on November 16, 1998, "Hunger Rising in the State", said that the demand statewide for emergency food aid was on the rise and that food banks are reporting longer lines. They also point out that, "the people waiting in lines are children and working families".

Many politicians report that the economy is "booming". But at the same time we know that jobs that pay a living wage are hard to find – especially if you do not have a GED and the necessary skills. Most of the women we know are struggling even harder now than they were before to make ends meet.

So, what is really going on?

A lot of people are talking about this question, and a lot of them are saying the same thing, "Welfare Reform is hurting more than it helps". At the end of this section we have included some excerpts from several newspaper articles and reports – if you are interested. Our thoughts and experiences follow.

What do you think?

Miranda:
It's like I was saying, if you don't have any experience, and you don't know how to read, and you don't know how to write, what kind of job they got out there? There's not enough jobs.

Carole:
How can I look for a job, when I don't really got a proper education, to get the job what I need. You know? But my worker said well, that's the welfare rule, I'm sorry. You gotta go to work or do community service. I cannot go to school.

How could I get a job with a low education?

It's not like I don't want to get a job. I'm willing to work. I just want to finish up school.

I went somewhere once to put in an application, but they didn't call me back. And I don't really have any job experience, and I don't have a diploma. I applied to a packing job in a warehouse. It paid minimum wage. But they didn't call me back. I called for two others, on the phone, but they told me that I have to have a car to get around -- it was a housekeeping job.

I can't get a job with the education I got. And you know what too? When the welfare sends me to work [for the Work Requirement], like if I got to go to a hotel, the people down there, they look funny like, low, like you're a piece of shit. Yeah, like you're a piece of shit and wanted to do, do those dirty work. But you know, you have your diploma and you go look about a job for yourself, on your own, they respect you more. But with welfare, they look on you like you're nothing, "Just do this!".

The worker told me about another job, but I had to work on weekends. I told them I can't do that, because I don't have anyone to look after the kids. So, they told me could I get someone to look after them, like a friend or something, to watch my baby from 3:00 to 11:00, but that's hard. What, I'm going to leave my baby with a stranger? Or a neighbor? I don't want someone to sexually molest my child or something like that, you know?

Myth: *Welfare provides a decent living and no incentive to work.*

Fact: *AFDC benefits for a family of three in 1996 averaged $377 per month, or $4,524 per year, about 36 percent of the poverty level for a family that size. In no state did AFDC benefits bring a family above poverty.*

Myth: *People on welfare don't work because they are lazy.*

Fact: *Welfare recipients have trouble finding or keeping jobs for a variety of reasons. In recent studies, 60 percent say they lack adequate child care; only 6 percent own cars; nearly half lack a high school diploma; 15 percent to 20 percent are struggling*

with substance abuse; 60 percent have been victims of abuse; and as many as 40 percent suffer from mental health problems.

***Myth:** Welfare reform is moving millions of welfare recipients off the rolls and into steady jobs.*

***Fact:** While the national welfare caseloads are down 30 percent since their peak in 1994, only half of those leaving the rolls are actually finding work, the same percentage as before the passage of the federal welfare reform bill.*

***Myth:** Anyone who wants a job can find one, especially in today's good economy.*

***Fact:** Even in today's job-rich economy, unemployment rates for those most likely to be affected by welfare reform remain high. In 1996, the unemployment rate for young, African-American women without a high school diploma was 21 percent.* *(From "Welfare Myths and Facts", a Web Site Publication of the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, 1999, http://www.mott.org/poverty/ending_welfare/.)*

Steve Reuys (in his article, "Impact of Massachusetts Welfare Reform on Adult Basic Education" in ALRI's All Write News, January 1997) says that Welfare Reform assumes, "that there are plenty of entry-level jobs out there [that give] a family-supporting wage", and that these jobs require, "only basic levels of literacy and other skills". In fact, however, there are very few entry-level jobs that will give a family a living wage, "A recent study in Illinois found that only 4% of entry-level jobs in that state pay a livable wage for a family of three, and the story in Massachusetts is unlikely to be very different". He goes on to say that, "the literacy levels required for anything but …sub-poverty-level jobs has been steadily rising". He ends his article with these comments, "Thousands of families are being hurt by a …welfare policy that deprives adults (mostly single mothers) of the support needed for finding a route to long-term economic independence. The war on poverty has been replaced by a war on the poor".

Ayanna McManus (in the September/October issue of Rising Times) asks, "State governments have been quick to give the "good news" about declining numbers on the welfare rolls - but what is behind these numbers?

A report released on August 20, 1999 by the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities found worsening conditions for the poorest 20 percent of female-headed families. Though their incomes rose … from 1993 to 1995, before welfare reform, their incomes fell from 1995 to 1997, during the period when welfare reform kicked in. …Forty percent of the women who have made the "transition to work" still remain poor.

…Just because women are no longer receiving assistance … does not mean they have found work and can provide for themselves. According to an Urban Institute Study, about a quarter of the women who left the rolls were not working, and had no partner working.

No wonder that nearly one out of every four children in the United States is growing up [poor]—a far higher percentage than in other industrial countries.

We're told that the economy has never been so good. Tell that to the third of families who are now off welfare, but who have been forced, according to the Urban Institute Study, to cut the size of meals or skip meals in the last year because there wasn't enough money for food.

The government [wants to] paint a picture of welfare reform as a success. But … it is clear that welfare reform has hurt more than it helps".

While the Clinton administration continues to insist that "welfare reform is working," many studies have reported increased hunger and homelessness among families with children.

In 1995, before welfare reform, poor children fell an average of $1,471 below the poverty line. By 1998, they fell an average of $1,604 below the poverty line. Taking into account the unrealistically low official poverty line, this is a considerable

amount. In 1998 the US poverty level was $13,133 for a single parent with two children and $16,530 for a couple with two children. A per-child poverty gap of $1,604 translates into a shortfall of $6,416 for a poor family of four persons, leaving an income that is less than two-thirds of the amount that the government considers a bare minimum. *(Debra Watson from "Poverty and Hunger Worsen Under US Welfare Reform", 12 January 2000)*

A report released August 20 by the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities found worsening conditions for the poorest 20 percent of female-headed families. Wendell Primus – who resigned a high-level position in the Clinton administration in protest of the welfare cuts, commented, "It is disturbing that substantial numbers of children and families are sinking more deeply into poverty when we have the strongest economy in decades and when substantial amounts of funds provided to states to assist these families are going unused." *(Debra Watson from "Three Years of US Welfare Reform: Hunger Grows, Poverty Deepens"26 August 1999)*

Massachusetts is known for universities that educate the best and brightest in business, but … neither the state nor private companies are doing enough to train lower-skilled workers and help them move up to take the higher-level jobs being created by a booming economy.

The lack of training programs for low and middle income workers has … contributed to the gap between their pay – which is stagnant or declining - … and the rising earnings college graduates. *(Kimberly Blanton, "New Study Cites Lack of Employee Training Efforts", Boston Globe, 28 February, 2000)*

Stress, Fear and Worry

Many of the women we interviewed talked about their stress, fear and worry. Welfare Reform left them feeling even more uncertain about their future.

General

Sophia:
If I don't have welfare the first thing I'm going to have is a lot of depression. And when you have depression and you have so many things on your mind you can't do nothing. It's like walking in a circle.

Veronika:
Its affecting my nerves, my feelings ... it's affecting me emotionally. It's affecting my health. To be able to get so far to then end up with nothing ...if I would get cut off there would be no way I could support my family.

THE MORE YOU TRY TO GET AHEAD, THE MORE YOU GO BACK.

Miranda:
When I was coming to this program, I was happy, I was coming to class smiling. Then all of a sudden my social worker told me, "Well, your twelve months are coming up, what you gonna do?". And I looked at her, "What? What I'm gonna do, you know, I'm going to school because I don't know how to read, I don't know how to write. How am I going to struggle out there, fill out an application?"

Miranda at the Mental Health Center

It's hard for me, all this Welfare

Reform, no jobs out there, you don't got a high school diploma and things like that, it's hard. And that is what these social workers do not see.

My brain is all blocked up, thinking about the jobs. It's hard for us. They gonna cut us from welfare when there are not enough jobs out there for us. How we gonna pay our rent? How are we going to support our kids and pay our bills? Cause there are not jobs out there that supply for all that.

The more you try to get ahead, the more you go back.

I'm taking it, you know, I'm taking it day by day, [but] it is stressing me, --- I'm getting sick to my stomach.

Fears of Becoming Homeless

Below are excerpts from a press release about homelessness and Welfare Reform policies showing that the connection is real. Women who are facing the two-year time limit know this. Their comments - following the press release – show their fears clearly.

Press Release ***Welfare Cut Offs Make Families Homeless*** *posted on the State House News Service, Boston, MA, February 15, 2000*

> *Advocacy groups say homelessness is tied to loss of welfare benefits. Responding to a challenge issued by the state Department of Transitional Assistance (DTA), the Massachusetts Law Reform Institute (MLRI) has documented that families with children have become homeless because of the Administration's welfare reform policies.*
>
> *…MLRI [has] highlighted several cases where a direct link exists between loss of benefits because of the state's two-year time limit and homelessness.*
>
> *…[MLRI is] responding to comments made by DTA Commissioner Clair McIntire at a public hearing on January 19, in which she testified that no one in the state had become*

homeless due to termination of cash assistance. We felt it was imperative to respond …

… One case study focuses on a mother and young son who could not pay the rent and lost their apartment after their benefits were cut off. She has a job, is caring for her six-year old son, and is a responsible member of the community … But because DTA terminated her benefits, she became homeless.

…According to Jennifer Witherbee of the Massachusetts Coalition for the Homeless, the MLRI letter exposes just the tip of the iceberg. Loss of cash assistance results in homeless families, and if you want to find them, you don't have to look very hard. …

Also, as reported in GazetteNet on December 14, 1999:

The problem is getting worse despite the booming economy [because] the strong economy is pushing housing costs higher.

Carole:
I'm stressed out. I don't want to be homeless. I'm willing to work, you know but, it's kind of hard when you don't really got a good education - it's hard for you to go out there and look for a job. I don't know really what to looking for, where to start from. For real. I'm willing to work, but it's hard for me.

This is a conversation Karen Gladden had with Miranda about homelessness:

Karen G.:
Is there a possibility you could be homeless?
Miranda:
I could be.
Karen G.:
Well what about your children? Where will your children be?
Miranda:
That's what I'm' thinking about, you know. I don't want to be in a shelter.

Karen G.:
So, when your time limit is up, how are you gonna be able to pay all your bills?
Miranda:
I don't know, really. I do not know, I'm very confused at this point.

In the elevator, where I live, there was this lady talking about it, that she was cut off, and she started crying right there, she burst out crying, "I'm going to lose my apartment, how I'm going to find a job, how am I going to pay my rent, how I'm going to support my kids," and she had three kids, she's a single mom. I looked at my daughters, I closed my eyes, and thought, my God, am I going to be there too?

Veronika:
If I weren't getting [benefits], I'd be homeless. I'd be out on the street with my kids and God knows what would happen.

EVENTUALLY WE WILL END UP ON THE STREETS.

I don't have parents that would say, "Hey, you know, you can move in with us and we will help you and everything we can. We'll support you and your kids." I don't have a family like that. So, I mean, eventually we will end up on the streets.

Miranda (talking about her ten year old daughter):
She sees a lot of homeless people in the street. She says, "Ma, are someday we gonna be like that?". You know, it hurts me a lot because, you can imagine how many people are homeless at this moment.

Family

We talked about how Welfare Reform was affecting our families. Many of these effects are related to stress and worry, but are also about concrete changes in family structure and support. There are only a few comments here, but comments about how Welfare Reform is affecting our families appear throughout this book. All of the women whose words you are reading are mothers, and most are single mothers. Everything that affects them affects their families. When they are supported, their families are supported. When help is taken away, it is taken away from the whole family.

An article in the Daily Hampshire Gazette, "Ending Welfare As We Know It," talks about the effects of Welfare Reform on families.

> *Researchers from Yale and the University of California at Berkeley interviewed thousands of former welfare mothers in California, Florida, and Connecticut and found that two-thirds of them relied on relatives, friends, and babysitters for day-care while they were working.* (*"Welfare Reform's Children" in the Christian Science Monitor, 27 February 2000)*

> *... The ultimate test of welfare reform should include whether the well-being of poor children and families has improved, not simply how much caseloads fall.* (*Michelle Bazie and Toni Kayatin, "Average Incomes of Very Poor Families Fell During Early Years of Welfare Reform, Study Finds", Sunday, 22 August, 1999)*

> *People who lose their welfare benefits may be on the fast track to losing their children as well. Wendy Kane, from Western Massachusetts Legal Services says, "As [people] are cut off, if they [can't get a job] they could be in [danger] of becoming homeless ... or they could be in danger of their children being removed from them regardless of what kinds of parents they are". ...Massachusetts law does not allow the Department of Social Services to take away people's children just because they're poor. But lack of money may create any number of problems, from shortages of clothing to homelessness, that can cause parents to be charged with negligence or the failure to provide. ... The end result is a situation that may cost the state more in foster care expenses than it would have taken to keep families together – and*

that may leave both parents and children with trauma that will never heal. (Stephanie Kraft, "Ending Welfare As We Know It", Spring, 1997)

Myth: *Most welfare recipients are able-bodied adults who can fend for themselves.*

Fact: *Welfare is primarily a children's program. Two-thirds of welfare recipients are children, and all adult recipients are caring for children.*

Myth: *Many welfare families are headed by teenage mothers.*

Fact: *Less than 5 percent of all families receiving welfare are headed by a teenager.*

Myth: *Welfare is to blame for the rise in teenage childbearing.*

Fact: *Teenage motherhood has actually declined, not risen, since 1960. Teenage marriage, however, has also declined.*

Myth: *Women on welfare have large families.*

Fact: *The average family receiving welfare is smaller than the average family in the general population. The average welfare family consists of 2.8 persons, while the average family in the general population includes 3.16 persons. More than 80 percent of families on welfare have only one or two children.*

Myth: *"Family Cap" or "child exclusion" policies, which deny additional welfare benefits to mothers who give birth on welfare, are needed to curb out-of-wedlock births*

Fact*: Studies have found no link between welfare benefit levels and subsequent births to women on welfare. In fact, states that provide the lowest levels of welfare benefits tend to have the highest rates of out-of-wedlock births. A recent study of New Jersey's family cap law, which has denied additional benefits to 20,000 children since 1993, found that the policy has absolutely no impact on the birthrates of women on welfare.*

Myth: *A strict time limit is needed to move families off welfare.*

Fact: *About half of welfare recipients leave welfare on their own within one year, 70 percent within two years, 90 percent within five years. Unfortunately, many are forced to return due to lack of stable employment, adequate or affordable child care and health insurance.*

Myth: *Teen mothers and their children are better off staying at home with a parent or guardian.*

Fact: *For many pregnant and parenting teens, "home" is not a safe place. At least two-thirds of all teenage girls who become pregnant have histories of violence or sexual abuse at home.* *(From "Welfare Myths and Facts", a Web Site Publication of the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, 1999, http://www.mott.org/poverty/ending_welfare/.)*

Group Discussion:
The kids are getting stressed out too. You know, if one person in a family is feeling stressed, the whole family feels. And kids know. They are getting sick.

Carole:
My son is in first grade, if I tell him, I know that it would effect him in school. You know, 'cause, if I tell him we're going to get cut off, and you're going in a shelter with people, strangers, he would worry about it. He would cry, too.

> IF YOU DON'T HAVE NO PARENTS TO MOVE BACK IN WITH - OR A FRIEND - YOU'RE STUCK.

Christine:
In my community I've already seen women who have to go out there and be a prostitute to support their children. And I've seen homelessness. If you don't have no parents to move back in with – or a friend – you're stuck.

My own children don't understand why they have to live with their father now. My daughter cries … she's little, she doesn't understand. She doesn't have that confidence yet.

Miranda:
Last night I was talking to my daughter, I said, "Honey, there's going to be a lot of changes here now."
She said, "What do you mean, Ma?"
"Well, Mommy pretty soon is going to be cut off."
"That means they're not going to give you no more money?"
"No."
And she said, "But ma, how you going to get a job if you don't know how to read and write?"
She's ten.

What Helps You Keep Going?

Andrea:
My kids, they help me stay in school. If I can get help more with my reading and writing, I can help my kids and myself, I could get a good job instead of staying and doing nothing.

Miranda:
Knowing you, your own self, inside of yourself, that you know it's not going to be right. Cause there's always a conscience on you, you always have this feeling inside of you, that you should, no, don't do it this way because it's going to come out wrong. You have to trust that feeling.

KNOWING YOUR OWN SELF.

Sophia:
I know it's hard but I open my mind too – to encourage myself so I can do it. And I know it's hard but I can do it. If you think oh it's too much work or it's too much you know you're not going to do it. You have to keep going through the same routine, wake up and do the same, don't think about it. You think if you going to have a hard time just pack it. Don't think about it. You know that's the way I am.

Also, I want a good life for my kids. My kids are the reason for everything.

MY KIDS ARE THE REASON FOR EVERYTHING.

I get inspire from my grandmother. When I was little, she was there for me and my sister and for her kids. She was there for everybody and she was an old lady. I still talk to her – in my head - every night before I go to sleep. She is the one who give me inspire. She is always there for me.

Church has helped me a lot too.

Christine:
I have hope. And I have to keep my confidence up – that helps. My family supports me about going back to school.

Also, the father of my children has a job and is supporting them.

I HAVE HOPE.

Jennifer:
Praying, encouraging myself and believing in myself, the support of my family, discipline. When you get down, you're not going to always feel like doing something. But just enduring, just picking yourself up and saying, okay, I can do this, I can do this, I can do this – and then just do it – that's discipline. And if you get frustrated with something, or tired, stop for a little while, but make sure you go back to it. You'd be surprised what you get done in five minutes a day.

I have HOPE. And I have big dreams.

I have God. I can go to Him and talk to him about my problems and He is always there to listen.

I HAVE BIG DREAMS.

I have a supportive family. They help me take care of my kids. I am going to school. I have no kind of income and I live with my family.

I HAVE A SUPPORTIVE FAMILY.

Although Jennifer talked about how much the support from her family helped her and her children, she also talked about how it was difficult for her to be dependent. As an adult, she wants to be independent, to feel she can support herself and her children on her own and to be able to help provide for her family. Having a supportive family is a gift, but her dependence also challenges her self-confidence and feelings of self worth.

We think it is important to point out this dynamic because by the numbers, by State and National statistics, Jennifer and others like her are considered to be success stories. They are no longer receiving welfare and they are doing fine. But what is really going on here? They are doing "fine" because their families have the ability and the willingness to support them. That is good - in the short run - but in the long run, these women are left in the same position as before: without the education and training they need to find and keep living wage jobs. They are left knowing that they are completely dependent on others for their survival and the survival of their children. We do not believe that this is how we build strong and healthy families - by creating policies that make it harder, in the long term, for parents to provide for their children financially, emotionally and spiritually.

My family is supporting my kids. I eat my mom's food, my mom buys my clothes, my family buys my clothes – it's very uncomfortable. I'm blessed and I'm so grateful, but it's very uncomfortable because I'm a grown woman I and see my mom has her own bills. I would like to help out – I'm sorry, I'm getting emotional.

Veronika:
What helps me stay in school is having my mom there to stay with my kids. What would help me is to stay in school as long as I need to – not having to rush you know, trying to do everything to fast to get my GED test. I don't wanna go take it and fail. I want to be prepared enough to be able to take it and at least know that I didn't fail as much, you know?

What Do You Recommend?

What Would Help You to Meet Your Goals?

We talked about those things that people might not have now, but need in order to meet their goals.

First and foremost was the desire to stay in school, to have the support necessary to get the education and training needed to get a living wage job, to not have to depend on welfare or on others to support yourself and your family and to work towards your goals.

The state might save some money in the short term, but in the long run the cost of not giving people the support they need up front is going to be much higher than what is being saved now. The cost will be in homelessness, in increased crime (people trying to figure out any way they can to make ends meet), in poor health, in children not doing well in school, in families that can't stay together. Why not simply give people the support they need now so that can become independent and remain independent – rather than cutting them off before they're ready. What good does this do? Do we want a healthy society, or do we just want to save a few dimes?

As Carole said so clearly:

> "If they want us to trick [*to become prostitutes*] on welfare, let's test people - who are not spending money on the kids - and let them test it. You know what I'm saying? See what happens when we end up out there on the streets".

The rest of our comments and thoughts follow.

Karen Gladden:
Those people [the politicians] make it hard for us, people who, like *Carole*, who is really, really trying. She's doing her part. They're spending all this money on the Welfare to Work Program, but they're

not giving *Carole* any skills to help her get ahead. They're spending money wastefully. And that needs to be stated.

Carole:
If I don't go to that program (Structured Work), they gonna cut my check before my time limit is up, so I do what they told me to do, you know?

GIVE ... MOMS THAT ARE ... TRYING TO GET THEIR EDUCATION, WORKING TO GET THEIR DREAMS BACK ... GIVE THESE MOMS A CHANCE. DON'T PUSH THEM OUT THE DOOR ... OPEN THE DOOR FOR THEM. LET THEM IN.

Miranda:
Give us a chance you know? Give us moms that are willing - moms that need programs like this, trying to get their education, working to get their dreams back - give these moms a chance. Give them a chance to move up, move ahead, not down. Push them up. Don't push them out the door. Get out faster, open the door for them, let them in.

Anna:
[What would help me is] to stay in school and learn English.

Alina:
Keep coming to school.

I NEED MORE TIME IN SCHOOL.

Sophia:
The support from welfare helps me, but I need more time. I need more time in school.

I would say to the lawmakers, "nobody is perfect". Sometimes you … have a lot of things on your mind you want to do but there is always something to stop you. Now that people are going to have an opportunity to do better, just let them try. You never going to have a bigger opportunity [than] education.

Group Discussion:
If I were in charge, I would make it possible for people to go back to school.

Carole:
Right now I'm really going through a stressed-out life ... with the welfare reform thing, you know? It's not that we are lazy women. I'm a strong girl, I'm willing to work, but I need my education first. It don't make sense I've dropped from school. You know, I don't even know how to get around, to fill ... to complete the forms. And I see a lot of people who using drugs and collecting the welfare money. They should be more strict on those people, have those people tested for drugs, and don't give them no checks. Because they use their money and do drugs and they should strict on that too. Because I'm trying to reach my goal right now, I'm going to school, so I don't see why they bothering me to stop from school.

I think this program (Read/Write/Now) would do better than "Structured Work" on Welfare to Work, you know. Instead, they're taking us out of school, to look at jobs, when we are here to better ourselves and better our kids too, you know.

Karen Gladden:
This should count, this should count, this should count, coming to school should count!

COMING TO SCHOOL SHOULD COUNT.

Jennifer:
They should take tests down at Welfare. And if you got a person that's not writing, that goes to show – something's wrong. They need to go to school. Maybe their family is not supportive, they're on their own. They need help.

Anna:
To put and judge a person, people, they should first ask more questions [of] the people who is still on welfare. They should … find out another idea what to do before they drop people off welfare. That's what I think.

The ones that couldn't read and write, they shouldn't have took off of welfare. They are tryin' - they should be given a longer time to get on their feet.

Miranda:
When I was in this program, there were teachers that were gonna teach me how to fill out the applications on my own. They were gonna get applications from all different kinds of places. But you're not gonna have me read and write from one day to the other day. You're not gonna know how to read perfectly real quick. No, that takes time.

Veronika:
They have to give us a chance. I would tell them [the lawmakers] to think, "How did you get to where you are?" First of all they get there by going to school. By getting themselves and education, you know? I would tell them to put themselves in our shoes. How would it feel to be us in their position telling them that they have a two year limit to get to where they are and they don't even know how to read, they don't' know how to write, they have emotional problems … I want to let them know that there are a lot of women, women and teenagers out there that really want to try, but they not giving us a chance to try.

People talked about political power; political representation, and the desire to be heard by politicians.

Group Discussion:
Who is being affected most by this? The women and the children. How many men do you know who is faced with this issue? Who are the people who are running the government when you look at who is in the government? Men, right? So, we need some more women up in there.

WE NEED SOME MORE WOMEN UP IN THERE.

IF THE CONGRESS WAS MADE UP OF ALL WOMEN, I THINK THE LAWS AS THEY STAND IN THIS COUNTRY MIGHT BE A LITTLE DIFFERENT.

If the Congress was made up of all women, I think the laws as they stand in this country might be a little different.

Karen Gladden pointing to pictures of a Welfare Reform Rally she and Karen Rivera attended in New York City. The rally was for economic justice.

Group Discussion:
Let the politicians be on welfare and see how it feels. Let them pay the rent the light the gas the phone, the bus fare, food, clothes, whatever.

LET THE POLITICIANS BE ON WELFARE AND SEE HOW IT FEELS.

Andrea:
I wish they was in our shoes and see how we feel, you know. How they feel one day on welfare suffering how we suffering? You know with kids that's sick and need medication and we having to be paying

it out of our pocket. It's not right that we have suffer because of them.

[I'd like to] see if I could talk to one of these people that's higher than us and see why they doing that. You know we got kids – it's not like we're not doing nothing. We working too. Going to school, trying to do our best … I would tell them, why you have to change the laws? There's kids are here that's got no food, you know, no clothing, how we gonna do it? Who's gonna stay with the kids while you work? While you work for $5.25 and hour and bring home nothing?

Carole:
I would like us, the literacy parents, who don't have a good education, to get together with paper and march. Sign up something, or march down to the welfare. While we're sitting here, we're not gonna get help, and nothing is not going to change. Go down, have a meeting with the mayor … and put it in the paper. Let everybody know what's going on.

Also, we should go together and talk to the worker and let them know that how can we get a job with them taking us out of school? We trying to make the future better, you know?

Samira:
I think we need to pull our words together ... maybe send a letter out to the person, the government, because while we are talking among ourselves, to help each other, at the same time it would be good for us to reach out for help. Because ... the government ... they got the right to do anything they want to do. But, they are supposed to help those who are trying to help themselves, who have goals, you know, trying. Some people depend on the government to do everything for them, but some people really don't depend on the government, but they don't have the kind of education they want to have.

The government supposed to look into that, let us know that they are seeing these people, and they are trying their best to get their life right. They're supposed to help those people, not take them out. Because if they take them out, the education they want, they're not going to get it.

Do they set something up like this, something to help those who help themselves?

Karen Gladden:
No, I think they overlooked it if you ask me.

WAKE UP GOVERNMENT, HELP THOSE THAT HELP THEMSELVES!

Samira:
I think we gotta focus, we gotta put strength behind it.

Wake up government, help those that help themselves!

All the social worker have to get together, they have a vote, if they get together, if they vote, if they on the side of the poor, that won't lose.

Miranda:
We want someone out there to read our words. As long as it gets OUT THERE. Give it to the government!

Lizzie:
I still wonder why Hillary has not gotten involved. Maybe we should write her, and send her some of the stories ... We should send one to Oprah, to Hillary Clinton.

Carmen and Carole waiting for the bus

Many of the women we talked to spend at least one to two hours a day on the bus. They take the bus to go grocery shopping, to take the kids to school and to day care, to go to appointments, to go to classes. Bus fare can get expensive. Sometimes the bus is crowded

and does not stop. The bus does not always go to the places where jobs open up. Reliable and affordable transportation is an important concern for all of the women with whom we spoke - and for most people trying to live, work and raise families in the United States today.

The women with whom we spoke talked about jobs, trying to make a living wage, and the issue of equal pay for equal work.

Group Discussion:
I think a woman should get equal pay, like you know, if you do the same job a man do.

If you make $5.25 an hour, after you pay for day care, you don't got nothing.

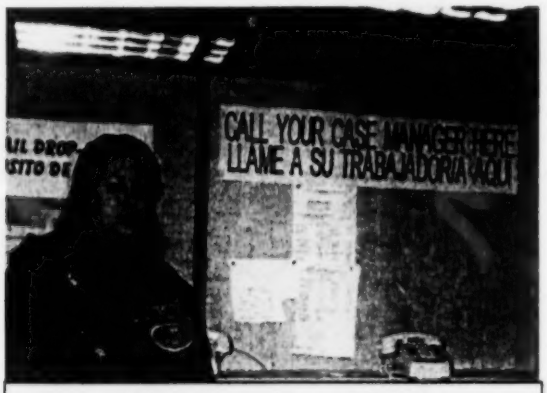
I recommend they give up their jobs at the Welfare Office and give them to us.

Carole:
If they want us to trick on welfare, let's test people - who are not spending money on the kids - and let them test it. You know what I'm saying? See what happens when we end up out there on the streets.

Question:
What would you want to tell people who are making these laws, the new laws about welfare reform?

Miranda:
Just put more jobs out there, that's all, and it would help us, that's all, if you put more jobs out there.

People talked about their needs for support navigating "The System".



Miranda waiting at DTA

Karen G.:
There is not enough information given us by the workers. There is lack of understanding, there is lack of patience. You feel uncomfortable when you go there because you feel less. I think some of them need some job training. The need to give information to help us out so that we can get on our way. It is not that we don't want to, but with lack of information, we are just stuck, lost.

Samira:
What this program could do to help is ... what I would like for them to do is, help me to still get my little check so I can keep on. I would also like someone in the program - one of the teachers that teaches me - to go to the welfare office with me. Maybe then someone can talk to my worker because the money I'm making is nothing, for them to take my check down.

YOU SHOULD ALWAYS HAVE SOMEONE GO WITH YOU TO THE WELFARE OFFICE, A FRIEND TO GIVE YOU SUPPORT, AND SOMEONE TO BE A WITNESS.

Lizzie:
I think one thing is, if you want some help, and you want to negotiate something with your social worker, you should call an organization like Arise and get someone to go with you. Or have a friend go with you. You should always have someone go with you to the welfare

office, a friend to give you support, and someone to be a witness. It's your word against hers. Cause they will not take your word for it. You should have someone there besides yourself - if she was always giving you a problem because you were there by yourself. If I go with you, she's not going to give you that problem, because you got someone there. And, she has to conduct herself better. She has to conduct herself in a more business-like way. She'll tell you more the truth, not just asking you for respect, you got a bad attitude. Or something like that. And the laws are always changing. You can call Arise to find out what is really going on, like with child care issues.

Carole:
i'd like Read/Write/Now to help us with this welfare thing, to help us to get a job when we get our reading level up and to work with the welfare. Know that we are here, and we are here everyday. Every month the school could send an attendance to the welfare, and say well, she's in school everyday and she wants something out of life.

We talked about the necessity of adequate child care, support from fathers; and transportation.

Group Discussion:
We need affordable day care.

If you make $5.25 an hour, after you pay for day care, you don't got nothing.

Samira:
I think what the government is trying to do - prevent us from having babies. Maybe the government should have programs to help men to take care of their children, for men to turn towards their children, so they'll have to do it, so that they know this is their responsibility.

And to the men: If you know you can't support your child, don't have a woman.

Carole:
You know ... my two first kids their father is in prison. He's doing ten years. How can he support the kids in jail?

The child care that's provided by the welfare, they don't treat the kids that good. You know. They're not clean, they're dirty in there.

GOOD, SAFE, RELIABLE, AFFORDABLE, CHILD CARE.

Miranda:
I been hearing bad things about them.

But they will not let you pick your own babysitter. No they won't. They'll pick it for you, but you cannot have, let's say, I want my mother-in-law, okay. *(Miranda tried to get her mother-in-law designated as a babysitter for her children and was denied)* ... My social worker that I have... she gets on my case. One time I went up, and I slammed my hand on the table. I said, "One thing lady, these are my kids, not your kids. Oh yeah, you see your kids, you take them to the day care center, they come all dirty. What are they gonna be doing? Blame DSS. You brought your kids dirty to the day care,". No, you can't trust nobody. I don't even trust, not even the light bulb that shines over my head. I don't trust no one.

Sophia:
It's hard when you don't have transportation and you don't have nobody there each day to help you.

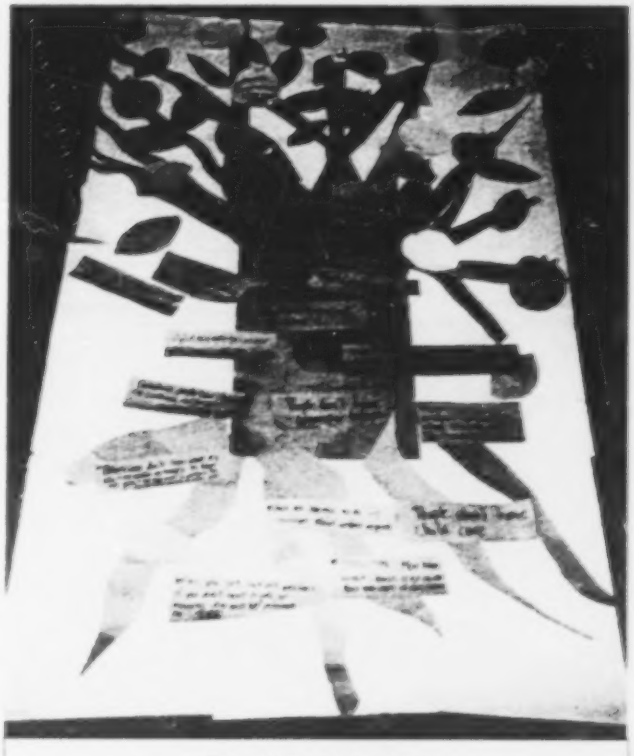
I NEED MY KIDS BACK.

Christine:
I need my kids back.

Learning Tools - The Tree and Carolyn Hicks

The following are two examples of tools we used for learning, and for telling others about what we were learning, during the course of our work.

This is a picture of one of the first trees we (the Changes Project Team) created at Read/Write/Now. It later became the inspiration for this book's title. We used this tree, which we called "The Miracle Tree", along with several others we created, to explore our understanding of Welfare Reform, its underlying causes and its effects, to keep track of our learning, and to identify places where we wanted to learn more. We include a picture of the tree in our book because it became almost a mascot for us. It was more than ten feet tall, and we constantly added to it – roots for underlying causes, words on the trunk for effects, branches for people's goals, and rain and sun and soil and pests for those factors which help or hurt the tree – and as our tree grew, so did our learning.



The Miracle Tree

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The Story of Carolyn Hicks

This photo is a picture story we created about a woman we named Carolyn Hicks. We used this picture story as one way of telling others about what we were learning, and as one way to represent the many stories we were hearing. Carolyn Hicks went with us to several conferences and presentations. Her story is found many times over in the pages of this book. In brief, it is the story of a woman whose clock is ticking – her two-year time limit is almost up. She is 39 years old, has five children, and is enrolled in an adult literacy program. Soon she has to leave her school to attend a Welfare to Work Program. For the required twenty hours a week she is there, she spends her time looking for jobs in the newspaper.

She is worried. Without a GED and without strong reading and writing skills, she knows it will be very difficult to find a job. The jobs she is qualified for do not pay enough for her to support her family, or enough to pay for childcare while she is at work. She is worried that she will have to take to the streets to make ends meet. She is worried that DSS will take her children away. She is worried about becoming homeless. She dreams of being able to return to school so she can get the education she needs to get and keep a living wage job. She's worried and angry about what she sees happening to her and to so many other women. She is thinking she would like to get some women together and go down to the State House and talk to the politicians and let them know what is happening. Maybe they just don't know what's going on, because if they did, wouldn't they make changes?